



**Andrea Jenkyns MP**  
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Skills

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Dr Jo Saxton  
Ofqual Chief Regulator  
by email: [Jo.Saxton@ofqual.gov.uk](mailto:Jo.Saxton@ofqual.gov.uk)

20 October 2022

Dear Dr Saxton,

In October, we published the Government's response to my department's public consultation on the Review of Post-16 Qualifications at level 2 and below in England. I am now writing to you to set out how I intend to proceed in strengthening funded qualifications available at level 2 and below to young people and adults studying post-16.

The range of qualifications available at level 2 and below will be broader than that at level 3, taking into account the wider range of levels and purposes of the qualifications that I intend will be available in the new landscape. Qualifications in scope of this review currently have a diverse range of approaches to specifying content, as well as to assessment and grading. I ask you to continue the work you have been undertaking with my department to determine the scale of change expected for different groups of qualifications.

For those qualifications that are identified as being necessary in the future landscape and which will be subject to review, I ask Ofqual to provide feedback to my department or, where appropriate, to the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE), to support funding approval decisions. The first part of this letter gives overall steers on qualifications at these levels; the second part gives more detailed steers on individual qualification groups.

Overall, it will be important to have coherence between the level 2 and below qualifications considered in this letter and the arrangements being put in place to strengthen level 3 qualifications. As at level 3, titling for these qualifications will be important to help students, employers and others navigate the qualifications landscape. I therefore ask Ofqual to work with my department on appropriate titling for these qualifications. You should also consider, as at level 3, the potential for eligibility to count in performance tables as an important purpose of level 2 qualifications when considering your approach to their regulation, while noting that I have not taken final decisions on whether all level 2 qualifications should count in performance tables in future. This should not be a consideration for level 1 and entry level qualifications.

In my department's consultation we consulted on guideline size ranges for a number of the level 2 and below qualification groups we expect to fund in future. In the government response to the consultation, we have been clear that whilst we do want to set guideline size ranges, we are keen to emphasise that they are guidelines only and that the purpose of the qualification should ultimately drive its size. I ask Ofqual to bear this in mind when considering its regulatory approach. In addition, we received feedback through the consultation that smaller qualifications and modular approaches can be important for students studying at level 2 and below. For technical qualifications at level 2, we expect the approach to modularity to mirror that at level 3 where elements of modular assessment are permitted to continue where this is necessary and appropriate, provided that this does not compromise occupational competence. For other level 2 and below qualifications, please work with my department to explore the use of modular approaches.

[Our response to the consultation](#) sets out the groups of qualifications we will continue to fund. My department has been working with Ofqual to put these qualification groups into clusters where the purposes are similar and may warrant a common regulatory approach. To minimise the burden on the sector, my department proposes to reshape the level 2 and below qualifications landscape on a phased basis, with first teaching of qualifications being introduced in stages between 2025 and 2027.

The table below sets out the five clusters of qualification groups and their first teach dates:

<b>Cluster</b>	<b>Qualification groups (as set out in the DfE consultation)</b>	<b>Qualification levels</b>	<b>When will reformed qualifications be first taught</b>
1: Qualifications which support progression to employment	2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 10	2, 1	2025, 2026
2: Qualifications which support progression to higher levels of study	1, 7, 9, 14	2, 1, entry	2026, 2027
3: English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) qualifications <sup>1</sup>	8, 13, 17	2, 1, entry	2027
4: Non-GSCE/FSQ English and maths qualifications	12,16	1, entry	2027

<sup>1</sup> This excludes ESOL International qualifications.

5: Personal, Social and Employability (PSE) qualifications	No group number allocated – subject to additional consultation	1, entry	2027
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The remainder of this steer letter addresses each of these clusters in turn. In line with the phased approach set out in the government response to the department’s consultation, I would like Ofqual to prioritise initially the development of its regulatory approach for qualifications supporting progression into skilled employment to support first teaching from autumn 2025.

***Qualifications which support progression to employment***

At level 2, my department has identified five groups of qualifications that will be needed in the future landscape that relate to progression to skilled employment. These groups are described in detail in our consultation response, but can be summarised here as occupational entry, occupational-focus, specialist, cross-sectoral skills, and progression to occupations where there is no occupational standard.

Although these groups have differences in their purposes, the common theme is that those taking them will likely be doing so with a view to entering, or progressing within an occupation for which employers have identified a skills’ need. An awarding organisation will need to demonstrate that those who have achieved these qualifications will be competent to the standard required by employers, and each will therefore need to be large enough to fulfil that core purpose, with a grading system that clearly differentiates between those who have achieved the required level of competence and those who have not.

To ensure these qualifications meet employers’ needs, IfATE will be responsible for approving them in line with the powers granted through the Skills and Post-16 Education Act. Qualifications approved by IfATE will then be eligible for the department to consider for funding. However, the awarding organisations offering these qualifications, and the qualifications themselves, will also be expected to comply with Ofqual’s existing regulations and any additional requirements you deem necessary to ensure the quality of these qualifications.

Ofqual and IfATE have already worked together effectively to design complementary approaches for the review, and approval by IfATE, of level 3 technical qualifications, taking account of the respective roles of each organisation. For example, this has included the creation of a single set of assessment strategy requirements, which will be used in Ofqual’s approach to regulating these qualifications as well as in IfATE’s approval decisions. I believe such approaches will provide a good basis for your regulatory approach to these qualifications at level 2, and that this will help to minimise the burden on awarding organisations by ensuring that there is consistency across IfATE’s and Ofqual’s requirements where appropriate.

The qualifications described above are all at level 2, but there is also a group of level 1 qualifications which are considered prerequisites to employment. These qualifications are not mapped to IfATE’s occupational standards, which only exist at

level 2 and above. However, they are highly important to employers in the sectors they serve, covering areas such as safeguarding. Some are also linked to occupational regulation schemes relied on by employers, such as health and safety qualifications in the construction sector. My department will assure itself that these qualifications continue to meet employer's needs but has identified no common issues with these qualifications. I ask Ofqual to take this into account in determining your regulatory approach.

### ***Qualifications which support progression into higher levels of study***

I have also made provision for a further range of qualifications at entry levels 1-3, level 1 and level 2 which will support students to progress to higher levels of study. It is crucial that the design of these qualifications, in terms of content and assessment, supports the primary aim of progression to study at higher levels. As at level 3, my desire is for these changes to result in an improvement in quality, leading to clearer progression pathways and enhanced navigability for students. This will need to be balanced with the need to minimise disruption for providers, while recognising that some qualifications will need to change more than others in order to meet my expectations on quality.

### ***Qualifications supporting progression to T Levels***

For students who have the potential to progress onto a T Level and would benefit from extra support and preparation before undertaking one, my department has already made provision for the T Level Transition Programme (TLTP). It is my intention that qualifications designed to support progression onto T Levels should provide a breadth of knowledge, understanding and skills that will prepare students for study in a T Level route. These qualifications should support the aims of the programme and be well-aligned with the national expectations in the Framework for Delivery for the TLTP. It will also be important that they are engaging and motivating for the students that take them.

As these qualifications will primarily form just one part of the TLTP, it is important that they are large enough to cover broad content relevant to a route, but not so large as to overly restrict all the other important elements of the programme. I expect awarding organisations to pay particular attention to the size guidelines set out in the government's response to the consultation on qualifications at level 2 and below, while noting our overall position that these are guidelines only.

My department has developed National Technical Outcomes (NTOs) for each T Level route to support consistency in the technical knowledge and practical skills students develop on this programme. We are intending to consult on whether and how these NTOs should form the basis of the content of qualifications designed to support progression onto T Levels. I would like you to work alongside officials and consider approaches to regulation that will allow you to take account of the outcomes of this consultation.

These qualifications should help prepare students for what they will experience on T Levels. In my view it is therefore important that they are designed to support an approach to teaching and learning that allows students to apply knowledge,

understanding and skills in a practical context. I would be satisfied for elements of modular assessment to exist in these qualifications. However, modularity must be appropriately balanced with the need for assessments to draw together the knowledge, understanding and skills developed through the content. Overall, I expect the frequency of assessment within these qualifications not to distract from, or predominantly drive, teaching and learning.

To support clarity for those who will use the results of these qualifications, in my view it is important that there is a single consistent grading approach. I would like Ofqual to work with my department to explore an appropriate approach to differentiating attainment, based on the needs of those who will use the results of these qualifications. I would also like Ofqual to provide advice to my department on appropriate controls to ensure the robustness of qualifications in the same route. This should help to build and maintain confidence in these qualifications.

I recognise that the level of change to existing qualifications to secure alignment to T Level routes and the TLTP Framework for Delivery may in some cases be considerable. However, for the reasons outlined above I consider this to be important and proportionate.

#### *Qualifications supporting progression to level 3 technical qualifications which are not T Levels*

I have already made provision for qualifications at level 3 in occupational areas which are not covered by a T Level and, for adults only, in occupational areas that are covered by a T Level. I will therefore make provision for level 2 qualifications designed to support students to progress onto these qualifications, or onto apprenticeships at level 3.

I am content that existing approaches to qualification delivery and design continue where these support the aim of improving progression for students whilst providing an engaging course of learning. As with the qualifications supporting progression to T Levels, I expect students taking these level 2 qualifications to be given the opportunity to apply knowledge, skills and understanding in practical contexts, to support preparation for level 3 study.

#### *Qualifications supporting progression to level 3 academic study*

GCSEs will remain the main academic option at level 2 in the new landscape. However, I intend to make provision for other level 2 qualifications which support progression to higher levels of academic study. This is especially important for 16-19 year olds who have the potential to achieve at level 3 but are not immediately ready to progress aged 16. Other level 2 academic qualifications will only be permitted to exist where they include content which is substantially different to GCSEs and support progression to academic qualifications at level 3 which are offered as an alternative to A Levels.

To give students the best possible chance of success, these level 2 academic qualifications will need to offer students the opportunity to experience the types of assessment they will encounter in those level 3 qualifications, while ensuring that the

knowledge, skills and understanding they acquire provide a strong foundation for further study. Where existing approaches to qualification delivery and design support the aim of improving progression for students while providing an engaging course of learning, I am content that they continue.

### *Qualifications supporting progression to technical study*

At entry level and level 1, I intend to make provision for pre-vocational and pre-technical qualifications. These qualifications will provide a pathway to level 2 and above technical study and, ultimately, to skilled employment, for young people and adults who are not ready to study at higher levels due to their prior attainment or other barriers to progression.

Although these qualifications will not be mapped to occupational standards, my intention is that they will be aligned to one of IfATE's fifteen occupational routes (or for qualifications at entry level 1 and 2, potentially more than one route). These qualifications should equip students with the breadth of knowledge, skills and understanding needed to progress onto a technical qualification within that occupational route. To prepare them to progress to technical study, I expect students taking these qualifications to be given the opportunity to apply knowledge, skills and understanding in practical contexts.

Given the diversity of students taking these qualifications, I recognise the need for flexibility in their size, and in their design and delivery, that engages students in their learning. However, this will need to be balanced with the need to ensure that these qualifications fulfil their role in ultimately supporting progression to skilled employment.

### ***ESOL, Non-GCSE/FSQ English and maths, and PSE qualifications***

These groups of qualifications will each be based on nationally set standards in order to support comparability between students taking the qualifications. I outline below what they are and my intentions for their content, and I will write to you in due course to provide a further steer on my priorities for these groups of qualifications.

GCSEs and Functional Skills qualifications (FSQs) will be the English and maths qualifications of choice for most post-16 learners. However, alternative entry level and level 1 English and maths qualifications play an important role in providing literacy and numeracy skills for some young people and adults who cannot yet access GCSEs or FSQs, and are particularly important for students with special educational needs and disability (SEND). These qualifications will be mapped against National Standards for Adult Literacy and Numeracy, and my department will consider the need to update the standards as part of this process

English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) qualifications at level 2 and below are highly valued for supporting a diverse range of students based in the UK to improve their English, such that they can participate fully in society, and progress to or within employment or education. These qualifications will continue to be mapped against the National Standards for Adult Literacy and the Adult ESOL Core

Curriculum and my department will consider the need to update those as part of this process.

For many young students, especially those with SEND or from disadvantaged backgrounds, Personal, Social and Employability (PSE) provision is an integral part of their study programme, while for some adults it can offer an important first step towards re-engagement with education or training. To improve the quality of this provision and create a consistency of approach, it is my department's intention to develop a set of national standards for PSE qualifications which will include core content, key skills and behaviours.

### *Conclusion*

I ask Ofqual to work with my department and alongside IfATE in this ambitious programme of reform to support meaningful improvement in the quality of these qualifications. By working together, we will ensure that students can be confident the qualifications they choose are high-quality and offer the best possible chance to progress to their intended destination, whether that is to further study, apprenticeships or skilled employment.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'A Jenkyns', with a stylized flourish at the end.

**Andrea Jenkyns MP**  
**Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Skills**